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SUBJECT: BHUTANESE CENSUS UNLIKELY TO FACILITATE FURTHER EXPULSIONS

REF: STATE 27085

Classified By: DCM Robert O. Blake, Jr. for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) In response to Reftel and following our contacts with travelers to Thimphu, the Mission assesses little likelihood that the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) will use the upcoming census to justify further expulsions of ethnic Nepali citizens from Bhutan. United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Representative Renata Dessallien, who resides in Thimphu, told Poloff on March 15 that such a move would go against current positive trends in Bhutan. Dessallien cited recent positive changes in RGOB practices towards ethnic Nepali residents of Bhutan who have relatives in the Nepal camps, making it easier for them to access public service jobs, schools for their children and identity cards. She noted that these steps are starting to reverse ten years of discrimination and doubted the RGOB would begin integrating ethnic Nepali relatives of refugees if they were planning further evictions.

¶2. (C) Canadian High Commission Political Counselor Adrian Norfolk, who recently returned from Thimphu, told Poloff on March 9 that he believes the Bhutanese are moving in the right direction and will not use the census to expel ethnic Nepalese from the Kingdom. He also mentioned that the RGOB, in a major policy shift, is now providing ID cards to ethnic Nepalese with family members in the refugee camps. People have been waiting for years to get these cards to be eligible for government jobs, and it is unlikely that the Bhutanese government would decide to take these steps if they planned to use the census to expel more citizens, Norfolk stated.

¶3. (C) However, our human rights contact offered a more cautious assessment. According to Ravi Nair, Executive Director of the Asia Pacific Human Rights Network, a number of people from the eastern districts of Samdrup Jongkher, Mongar, Tashigang and Tashiyangchi have been left without ID cards after questions over their citizenship status arose during the census. (Note: This view may not be accurate, because according to the Bhutanese Embassy, UNDP's Dessallien and Norfolk, the census has not yet begun. End Note.)

¶4. (C) The RGOB has not officially responded to our requests for information on the census, but Bhutanese First Secretary Karma Rinchen stated on March 16 that the survey had not begun, and would take place later in the year over a two-day period. Dessallien continued that the census has not commenced and that the RGOB plans to conduct the census in May of 2005, but predicted that it could also be delayed until the Fall because of logistical hurdles. The census conducted this year will be more comprehensive than those done in the past and in line with international standards, Dessallien noted. He added that the census will be conducted over a two-day period, and not district by district, as done previously.

Comment

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¶5. (C) Like UNDP and the Canadians, we also find it unlikely that the RGOB will use the census to deny citizenship to large numbers of its citizens. The RGOB is quite sensitive to its international reputation and understands that the creation of another refugee problem is not in its best interests. That said, it is likely that the census will uncover persons with questionable citizenship status, who may not receive ID cards.

MULFORD